

Tradition and Transformation in R.K. Narayan's *A Tiger For Malgudi*

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R.K. Narayan is often labeled "a small town ironist,"¹ who, with gentle humor, lays bare the weaknesses, foibles, and incongruities of ordinary people. As well, Narayan addresses fundamental questions about human existence, creating in Malgudi a fictional microcosm of India that embraces the organic wholeness of the Hindu tradition.² Here Narayan is especially sensitive to how humankind falls short in its religious ambitions, as his characters repeatedly settle for less than the ideal and are frustrated by the fundamental limitations of being human.³ In Narayan's most recent novel, *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), these limitations emphasize the unsettling disjunction between the philosophical underpinnings of Hinduism and their relevance to everyday life.

Central to *A Tiger for Malgudi* is how the individual, fettered by his own self-delusion, works within a framework established by the Hindu concepts of *dharma* and *karma*. *Dharma* is a word having many meanings, but in essence it points to how the individual, possessed of particular abilities, functions in society. How these come about results from the law of *karma*, which determines that every action produces an effect manifested in a present lifetime or a future one.⁴ Subject to the inevitable working of *dharma* and *karma* is the struggle, through the course of countless lifetimes, to break through ego-derived ignorance to realize the oneness of reality. While it might seem that one is trapped in a predetermined cycle, in which *dharma* and *karma* are linked, the individual always retains freedom of choice, and therefore the ability to break free of *samsāra* (i.e. cycle of existence), difficult though this task might be.

In *A Tiger for Malgudi*, then, Narayan aims to explode man's principal delusion that he "is all-important, that all else in creation exists only for his sport, amusement, comfort, or nourishment."⁵ To this end, the human characters of *A Tiger for Malgudi* are presented as trying to manipulate the natural world for their own ends and failing miserably in the process. By using a tiger as his central character, and by allowing the reader to see through a tiger's eyes, Narayan portrays man as selfish and insensitive to the world, as well as totally unaware of his role in the great scheme of things. That Raja's thoughts and activities are superior to anything he observes of humankind affirms just how much the individual is immersed in egocentric ignorance.

¹M.K. Naik, "Theme and Form in R.K. Narayan's *The Maneater of Malgudi*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 10, No. 3 (1976), 65.

²See Keith Garebian, "The Spirit of Place in R.K. Narayan," *World Literature Written in English*, 14 (1975), 292.

³See D.W. Atkinson, "Spiritual Growth in the Fiction of R.K. Narayan," *Asian Profile*, 13, No. 3 (1985), 271.

⁴See Sarsavati Chennakesavan, *Concepts of Indian Philosophy* (Madras: Orient Longman, 1976, 1976), 195-225.

⁵R.K. Narayan, *A Tiger for Malgudi* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 8. All references are to this edition.

A *Tiger for Malgudi* is developed in three parts, each recounting a period of Raja's life, and each expressing some aspect of the *dharma-karma* theme. The first section focuses on Raja's life in the jungle, where as a hunter and predator he feels no remorse for what he does. It is, Raja confesses, "a time of utter wildness, violence, and unthinking cruelty inflicted on weaker creatures" (p. 13). Raja is completely resolved to this role in the divine plan, and accepts that some things are beyond question and cannot be changed; as he says, "I don't know why God has chosen to give us this fierce make-up, the same God who has created the parrot, the peacock, and the deer" (p. 12). Here the nature of *dharma* is presented, not only as determining one's actions, but also as imposing certain expectations realizable only through individual initiative and action. Raja does not therefore automatically become "King of the Forest" (p. 13): the submission of other creatures is worth nothing unless it is earned.

The second part of the novel begins when Raja's mate and cubs are killed by hunters. Raja's response to his loss is predictable and natural. There arose within him "a blind impossible anger" in which he "just wanted to dash up, pounce upon every creature, bite and claw and destroy" (p. 24). But Raja also finds that preying on domestic animals is much easier than pursuing creatures in the wild. Crucial in Raja's make-up is his pride in being a tiger; now, however, he takes pride in carrying off the defenseless villagers' sheep. Much after the fact Raja recognizes his mistake in turning away from what he is by nature. "Looking back," Raja says, "I feel that I should not have chosen the easy path—of raiding villages" (p. 31). It is because Raja forgets who he is that he becomes careless and is transformed into the unnatural creature who performs for circus patrons and film directors.

Revealed, as well, in Raja's circus and film experiences is the important distinction between what one has control over in one's life and what one does not. Raja can, for example, do little to prevent the destruction of his cubs and mate; and, similarly, Raja, once captured, can do little about what Captain inflicts upon him. Nevertheless, one must look inwardly to determine how best to respond to the events of one's life. As well, it does not mean that *dharma* can be changed. Thus Raja, although admitting that he is well kept by Captain, admits, "I was still a prisoner" (p. 96). One can never drive from the tiger his tiger's nature, and, when Captain finally pushes Raja too far, Raja kills him, albeit inadvertently, and his essential nature is reasserted. What occurs here anticipates the Master's observation that the spiritual process leading out of ignorance requires that one discover one's real self. One must get in touch with the *vāsana* (i.e. seeds) of one's past lives, which is "never lost, but is buried in one's personality and carried from birth to birth" (p. 166). That Raja returns once more to being a tiger suggests the positive orientation of Hinduism, pointing to the dynamic nature of the human personality, which can be deceived but which eventually overcomes this deception.

The connection between ignorance and egocentricity is further developed in *A Tiger for Malgudi* when Raja addresses why the villagers fear him. "It was due," Raja says, "to their general lack of a sense of security and an irrational dread of losing their assets" (p. 116). Narayan points to how possessions affirm self-importance and how humankind's greatest fear is having that self-importance compromised. There is the implication, too, that the freedom Raja regains is the freedom toward which all creatures, and especially humankind, should aspire. Instead humankind surrounds itself with prisons of its own making. What comprises this prison the Master makes clear when he tells the frightened villagers, "Never use the words *beast* or *brute*. They're ugly words coined by man in his arrogance. The human being thinks all other creatures are 'beasts.' Awful word" (p. 118). It is pride that lies at the root of human delusion and suffering. Also suggestive is when a villager asks the Master, "Is this the occasion to discuss problems of vocabulary?" (p. 118). When the Master answers, "why not," he indicates how language expresses human

egocenteredness, for it makes a statement about reality, not in any objective sense, but only in the sense the speaker sees it.

Significant in Narayan's development of the general theme of spiritual transformation is Raja's statement, made while he takes refuge in the local school, "I was enjoying my freedom, and the happy feeling that the whip along with the hand that held it was banished forever. No more of it; it was pleasant to brood over this good fortune" (p. 143). Freedom brings happiness, and freedom for Raja is to be his natural self. But at the same time, Raja's freedom is not absolute, and whatever happiness he enjoys is ephemeral. This "natural freedom" is important because it leads to the further end of absolute freedom from self delusion, to which Raja commits himself in the third and final section of the novel. Having been saved from the angry villagers by the Master, Raja becomes the *sadhu's* (i.e. wise man's) devoted disciple, learning much about his own nature, his place in the order of things, and his relationship with God. In this regard, the Master, in saying to Raja, "Understand that you are not a tiger, don't hurt yourself. I am your friend" (p. 144), points to the ultimate freedom transcending the apparent freedom from conventional labels.

The last part of *A Tiger for Malgudi* makes explicit what is largely implied in the novel's earlier sections. The Master describes God "as the Creator, the Great Spirit pervading every creature, a source of power and strength" (pp. 157-58). This contrasts with Raja's perception of God as "an enormous tiger, spanning the earth and the sky" (p. 158). The Master's suggestion is that man, and for that matter the tiger as well, makes God in his own image, and that neither perception of the divine corresponds to what the divine is in its fullness. Rather they are objectified conceptions of the divine which is internal to us, and are conditioned by who and what we are. Thus Narayan connects the notion of the divine with that of *dharma*.

Concerning the quest to realize the divine within, the Master makes the further point that the goal is not easily realized (see p. 160). The Master's message is that, consistent with the law of *karma*, one must work to move through various stages of increasing spiritual awareness until one consciously turns away from the world to achieve *samādhi* (i.e., enlightenment). In this struggle, one must stress, not one's failures, but one's successes, small though they might be. Underpinning what one does is that one must aspire in one's actions to live in the world without being consumed by it. The Master describes to Raja how we become too "busy and active and living by the clock," preoccupied with being "respectable" in society (p. 161). One must realize that one must live in the world without being fettered by it. As the Master says, one must take care not to be "overburdened with knowledge, facts, and information—fettors and shackles for the rising soul" (p. 161), which, "like food, must be taken within limits" (p. 161). One must further understand that to grasp after the world is to affirm one's egocenteredness and to perpetuate a fiction that can only bring suffering. It is with this in mind that the Master says, "No relationship, human or other, or association of any kind could last forever. Separation is the law of life right from the mother's womb. One has to accept it if one has to live in God's plans" (p. 174).

While *A Tiger for Malgudi* dwells on changes in Raja, it also, by stressing the static nature of other characters, suggests how they are victims of their own ignorance and spiritual inertia. Most obvious in this regard is Captain, who sees himself in total control of his own life and all that he touches. It is not that there is anything especially wrong with this attitude, for, after all, Hinduism teaches that one is responsible for the fruits of one's actions. What is wrong is that Captain is consumed by his own self-importance, which is manifested in the power he holds over both the animals and the people with whom he comes into contact. The entire Grand Malgudi circus, which Captain inherits, but then transforms to his own liking, is a central symbol of the fictional reality with which he surrounds himself. The

extent of Captain's deception is expressed in several other ways as well. Raja observes how Captain's sole aim for him was to run "round and round in circles in pursuit of nothing" (p. 51). Even tigers have purpose, something Captain fails to realize. Captain also introduces Raja to the circus audience as "not an ordinary, commonplace tiger but an intelligent creature . . . almost human in understanding" (p. 65). Ironically, what Captain says is true, as Raja possesses far more understanding than Captain himself. Finally, Captain is presented as a skilled linguist, capable of speaking to the audience in Hindi, English, and Tamil. The implication is that, while Captain speaks the words, he does not understand what he is saying. He neither appreciates how language is inherently deceiving, nor does he try to use it correctly.

Captain's self-importance is most flagrantly revealed in his relationship with Madan, the film director, who approaches Captain about having Raja perform in his film. Captain has no interest in the film, except that it offers him another way of controlling and manipulating others. Madan is forced by Captain to draft and redraft agreements, can only do with Raja what Captain allows, despite the "artistic" demands of his film, and is driven to desperation in "securing an audience with the great man" (p. 88). Captain is doing little more than playing power games with Madan, which give him a false sense of his own importance and enmesh him even further in the deception coming from such selfishness.

Madan is not, however, without fault, for he is equally insensitive in the way he treats Jaggu, his leading actor. Just as Captain manipulates Madan, so Madan treats Jaggu, first threatening him with punishment and then offering him a bedmate. It hardly needs saying that all Madan's plans break down: the film is never completed and Madan himself is reduced to hysteria. In having no relationship with reality, the film, like the Grand Malgudi Circus, symbolizes the fictional baggage humankind creates for itself.

One other character also serves to highlight the theme of self-deception. Jaggu is an innocent, who had, previous to his movie role, made what little money he could performing feats of strength; certainly he is neither actor nor hero. But Jaggu is also tempted by riches, which, in his own slow-witted way, he sees as a way of affirming his own importance. As well, Jaggu is totally out of touch with reality; nothing could be clearer than when Narayan describes the process of transforming him into a film hero. The makeup men, for example, touch "him up here and there as if he were inanimate" (p. 93). When Jaggu is described as giving "no sign of being alive" (p. 93), it is suggested that he is totally unaware of what is going on around him, and, like both Captain and Madan, unable to break through his own ignorance.

The Master is, of course, intended to serve as the ideal. When initially asked who he is, his answer signifies the basic goal that all the other characters, except Raja, ignore. "You are asking a profound question. I've no idea who I am! All my life I have been trying to find the answer" (p. 118). His instructions to Raja when he leads him to safety are equally suggestive: ". . . the eye is the starting point of all evil and mischief. The eye can travel far and pick out objects indiscriminately, mind follows the eye, and the rest of the body is conditioned by the mind" (p. 155). The Master suggests how one, while attracted to the world, is incapable of distinguishing what has meaning and purpose and what does not. In cluttering one's mind with the ephemera of life, one needlessly complicates it and loses sight of the true goal beyond particularity. Finally, the Master embodies the ideal in his action; he sees himself as nothing special, and rejects any attempt to treat him as a "holy" man. He says to those prostrating themselves in front of him, "I am not different from you, we are equals and [you have] no need to pay homage to me. It has no meaning" (p. 164).

There seems, then, a very clear assertion in *A Tiger for Malgudi* of very basic Hindu teachings. Not all, however, is as clear as it appears. It is relevant here that the less admirable characters such as Captain and Madan are much more fully developed than the Master, who is a shadowy and unconvincing figure for a good part of his relationship with Raja, and who, when his wife appears at the novel's end, becomes a very contradictory one. Narayan is far more interested in the characters that fall short of the ideal, and one is therefore left wondering to what degree Narayan is committed to the Hindu world view that *A Tiger for Malgudi* seems so clearly to espouse. While to some the closure of *A Tiger for Malgudi* might seem contrived and weak, it is possible to see Narayan consciously placing the novel against an ironic backdrop which brings into question its religious and philosophic underpinnings.

Crucial to this approach is the sudden introduction into the novel of information concerning the Master's early life. In contrast to his present life as an ascetic in a loincloth, the Master's early life was committed to satisfying his own selfish appetites. The Master's wife describes how "others may take you for a hermit, but I know you intimately": she talks of his "inordinate demands of food," and of how he insisted on her "total surrender night or day" whenever passion "seized" him (p. 170). Thus the reader is presented with two radically different views of the Master, with the portrait of his earlier life suggesting what must be overcome to attain the stage of *sannyāsin* (i.e. ascetic) and ultimately the achievement of *samadhi* (i.e., enlightenment). This juxtaposition of past and present, however, also presents problems, for it begs the question of how and why this radical transformation came about. All the reader is told is that the Master left his wife and family without warning and without ever telling them of his intentions. For the Master to say as he does that his past does not count is not sufficient to satisfy the reader's curiosity.

There are other ambiguities in the Master's character as well. The role of *sannyāsin* demands that one fulfill one's responsibilities as a householder before embarking on the singleminded pursuit of enlightenment. In calling the Master's act of "renunciation" one of "desertion," his wife suggests that the Master may not have done as he should, and thus who and what he is comes under suspicion. The same can be concluded when she says to him, not without a hint of irony, "one has the right to show one's veneration for a sublime soul, a saint perhaps" (p. 167). The "perhaps" adds an unsettling note that cannot be ignored. In attempting to distance himself from his wife, the Master insists that his wife refer to him as "he" rather than "you"; he rebukes her saying, "You are beginning, I now notice, to use the word 'you,' which is not proper; keep to 'he'" (p. 170). Such unnatural expression conflicts with the Master's overt claims about truth, and suggests that the Master is not as honest as he thinks either with himself or others. The most troublesome feature of the novel is what finally happens to Raja. When the Master goes off to release himself "from all bondage" (p. 174), Raja, rather than returning to his natural state a wiser tiger, is sent to a zoo because, as the Master says, "he is only a tiger in appearance . . . He is a sensitive soul who understands life and its problems exactly as we do" (p. 167). If this is truly the case, then it hardly seems appropriate that he be reduced to a zoo animal taking a "tonic" each day to improve his coat. As in both the circus and the film, Raja is trapped in a totally alien environment. That the Master talks of it as a "new life" (p. 176), in which Raja will make hundreds of people happy, does not change the incongruity of the situation. That the Master is directly responsible for Raja's new life, with all its similarities to those imposed on Raja by Captain and Madan, seems more than a coincidental parallel, and generates yet more questions concerning the Master's so-called wisdom.

It is difficult to accept the unresolved conclusion of *A Tiger for Malgudi*. This lack of resolution need not be seen, however, as an artistic flaw. Rather it enhances what is already evident from the rest of the novel: that man is a complex creature

with complex problems for which there are no absolute answers. From Narayan's point of view, traditional religion purports too often to provide absolute answers that are taken far too seriously. The aesthetically unsettling way in which the novel is left hanging is therefore an effective counterpoint to the implied inadequacies of the world view which it espouses.